

Senator Lamar Alexander
Floor Remarks June 11, 2020

Yesterday, our Senate Education Committee held a hearing on going back to school safely, a subject on the minds of tens of millions of American families since today two-thirds of married parents both work outside the home and they have children, and the children are ready to go back to school, and the parents are even more ready for them to go back to school.

The commissioner of education from Tennessee was one of our witnesses yesterday. She said we want children to do two things. We want them to be safe, but we want them to thrive. That's the sense I got from all of the witnesses yesterday, which included the Denver school superintendent, a national representative of education, Dr. John King, and it included the commissioner of education for the state of Nebraska who's also the head of the Chief State School Officers.

Anyone who looks at the children in America today knows they need to go back to school. They'll have been out for five to six months. This is a time when we're especially concerned in our country and our attention is focused on racial injustice, on problems that minority families and minority children have. The single best thing that we could do to help minority children and minority families is to help them go back to school safely in August and September.

Any teacher can tell you, and most parents can tell you, the emotional and intellectual and physical damage to children that's been caused by being out of school since March and that will continue to be the case until they reopen in August. Articles have talked about 50% learning deficits. We have that every summer when children are away from school. Teachers in the fall know they have to catch back up.

It's also shown us the limits as well as the benefits of remote learning. My daughter has three young sons, two of them in school. She said they have about had it up to here with remote learning, even though they are in a very good public school system. There are limits to what you can learn remotely. Teachers aren't trained to teach remotely. In many parts of our country, broadband isn't sufficient to allow students to learn remotely. Teachers haven't made lesson plans to teach remotely, so they have to change the whole way they go about teaching. And then so much of the children being home affects home schooling. Home schooling is a good thing for parents who are able to do that, but home schooling is hard. It takes a lot of time. And if you are in a family, as two-thirds of married families are, and you are both working outside of the home, how are you going to do the home schooling appropriately? And so that your child doesn't get far behind.

So for the benefit of the children, the benefit of the parents, especially the benefit of low-income children, many of whom get one or two meals a day at school, we need to go back to school as a country. And when we do, when 100,000 public schools and 34,000 private schools, 56 million children go back to school and 20 million students go back to college, that will be the surest step toward regaining the rhythm of American life that we could

have. That would show we are actually going back to toward normal. It will be another year before we get to normal. I think we all understand that.

We're going at warp speed to find a new vaccine. We're building manufacturing plants for vaccines before we even know that they work. We have never done that before. In fact, there has probably never been a time in our history where we have had more scientific brainpower in this world devoted toward a specific target than we do right now at trying to increase the number of fast, rapid, accurate diagnostic tests, the number of treatments to reduce the effects of COVID-19, and a vaccine for COVID-19. Probably we have never had so many scientists in the world working on a single project as that. So we're likely to have some very good results from it, although it will take a while. So all the plans that are being made, and we heard about them yesterday, are for a whole year. Now, the next semester we'll have more tests, we will have more treatments, we will have more contact tracers, and there should be hopefully the beginning of vaccines. But our plans should be for a year.

Now, how do you make sure that the schools are safe? Well, the formula is pretty simple. Although it's not as simple in its application. But the things that we know work are staying apart some distance. That's one. Two, wash your hands. That's two. Three, wear a mask.

In colleges, that will be easier because colleges have more space. In fact, they are big wasters of space. They usually don't teach in the morning or in the evening or on Saturday or in the summer, and colleges can spread out and create smaller classes. There are more lectures. You can do lectures more easily. You can have a culture of mask wearing, at Purdue University as President Mitch Daniels testified the week before at colleges. So I think colleges will have an easier time than schools.

In addition to that, while we know that unfortunately COVID-19 affects older people. In Tennessee, for example, 5% of the cases of COVID-19 are in nursing homes, while nearly 40% of the deaths are in nursing homes. The same is true in other states. But COVID-19 affects younger people a lot less. Dr. Fauci has warned us not to be cavalier about that, but the truth is that younger people seem not to be as affected by COVID-19. So we've got a population that's not as affected. We've got a population that's in a smaller controlled setting. You can shut a school if someone gets infected and keep the other schools open. We do that with the flu. We've got children who are more subject to being told what to do. So we have a setting where we should be able to create—there are a hundred thousand public schools, as I said—little communities that are among the safest in our country. On the other hand, little children may have a difficult time wearing masks. They aren't the best at hygiene and children go home every day. So they may come back and forth bringing germs with them.

So we have those basics that I talked about, plus testing. What we know about testing is we have the capacity to do about ten million tests a month this month, according to Admiral Giroir. He said we'll have 40 million to 50 million testing capacity by the time we go back to school in August or September. That's four to five times as many as we have today. What's going on now is in Florida and Tennessee, every state, is making its plan for the tests that it needs, and sending it to the Admiral. They're working on it together. If the state has needs

that the state can't deal with, the federal government helps with that. So in our second month of that kind of relationship that seems to be working pretty well.

I know that in Tennessee, which is 11th among all the states in terms of testing per capita, the governor's motto is "if in doubt, get a test." You can go to the local public health department and get one in five minutes. Takes two or three days to get the result but there's no delay, no request. Anybody who wants it can get it. That has created an environment where everybody feels more comfortable. If they're worried about COVID-19, if they don't want to go home and see their older relatives or their spouse, if they wonder if they're sick, they can go get a test. So tests should be available for the schools.

We'll have to be careful and recognize that the way schools open will vary by community. There are many counties in Nebraska, the commissioner of Nebraska said yesterday, where there's not a single case of COVID-19. So on his dial of green to red in terms of school opening, they'd be very green. And wouldn't have to do much in response to the COVID-19 in terms of changing the way they operate. On the other hand in Omaha, it might be different in Nebraska, or in Nashville, it might be different, or in New York City or Phoenix it might be different. But the Denver schools superintendent talked about perhaps having children come for two or three days a week on alternate days in order to have smaller classes; about having extra time for disabled children or children from homes where they have less support, or more vulnerable children needing more help in our schools. But my hope would be that we can find ways for children to come back to as normal a school day as is possible.

It will take some flexibility. One of those that will need to be flexible are the states, the federal government, and the unions with their rules and regulations. Colleges have a lot of flexibility in rearranging class schedules, class sizes, class times. Schools have a lot less because they have state rules and union rules that restrict what they can do. They need some flexibility so they can reschedule. Then there's the question of money. Just as we say we want children to be safe, we want them to learn, there are two arguments on behalf of more money from the federal government.

One would be federal spending to help them learn. Generally that's the responsibility of state and local governments. They spend about 90% of that. But in our first COVID-19 bill, the federal government was generous with schools recognizing that we shut down the economy and then that shut down the schools and that caused a lot of expensive problems. So the federal government supplied \$13 billion. Tennessee got about \$260 million for just K-12 schools. There was another slug of money for colleges and then there was \$150 billion for states.

A big part of the state budget, 30% to 40%, goes to education. So my thinking is that a part of that \$150 billion, the ~~\$23~~ **\$13** billion we've already allocated to K-12, and the \$25 billion that we allocated to testing which can include contact tracers, some of which can be a part of schools, should help pay for keeping schools safe enough to reopen. If there's more money we need to be open to that, I think here in the federal government, but not before we see whether it's really needed. The Tennessee commissioner, and I put a lot of stock in

her thinking, because Tennessee is a conservative state, it doesn't spend a lot of extra money, has no debt, big rainy day fund, low taxes, a lot like Florida, she estimates that it will cost about a \$1.5 million per school district, an average school district would be about 3,500 students in her words, to provide the things that the school district needs to reopen safely.

Those are things like more sanitizing equipment, barriers that separate children in the lunch room or maybe even in class, extra money for busing, because when you create a lot of new classes and a lot of new schedules, you may have to change the bus schedules, and that will cost more than one thinks. So I would be very interested to see how much of the money we've already appropriated or how much of the money that we've appropriated that's very inflexible and might be made more flexible for governors to use just for opening schools safely and whether we need to add any more.

I think it's in our interest to make sure that principals and school boards know that they'll have sufficient funds to open 100,000 public schools safely, because school administrators, with all respect, sometimes are a little bit conservative, reluctant to take risks, and if there's the excuse that we don't have enough money to open safely, they may just say let's keep up with remote learning. I think we're about up to here with remote learning in most places in the country. It's especially not good for younger children and for children who are from disadvantaged families or low-income families. So I think it's important to get the country going and it's good for the children and it's good for the parents to make sure that schools have sufficient funds to reopen safely.

The one other thing I would mention is I heard about liability yesterday. The colleges and the schools I've talked to want to be included in whatever the federal government does to make sure that teachers and administrators and schools and universities are appropriately protected from lawsuits as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic. As long as they meet a standard of care that is reasonable, they should not have to worry about being liable if a child whose eight years old forgets to wear a mask, coughs on another child, that child goes home and makes grandma sick and grandma sues the school. Teachers are always worried about liability.

The teachers unions use offering liability insurance as one of the major incentives to join the union. Many states like my state provide tort liability for teachers, but I think we need to make sure here in the United States Senate that as we consider any additional legislation that has to do with COVID-19, that we include colleges and we include schools. We've received a letter from all of the colleges from the American Council on Education specifically asking us to do that. Otherwise we might discourage schools and colleges from opening and if we discourage schools from opening, that leaves children sometimes home alone, sometimes home without being educated, some of them being left with remote learning that doesn't help and developing a learning gap that will leave them at a disadvantage for the rest of their lives. So, as we look at all of the issues that we have to deal with, I hope that we include appropriate steps to put limits on liability, at least as a result of the COVID-19 experience.

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